From "Small Circle" to "Popularity": The Generalization Phenomenon of Chinese Internet Language in the Perspective of Post-Subculture

Jiehui Chen*, Fan Tang

Chengdu Neusoft University
*Correspondence Author, fionanachenjh@gmail.com

Abstract: *Chinese Internet language was originated in the Internet space and has strong subcultural characteristics. Some of them have broken through the "small circle" and generalized into popular language used by all people. The generalization phenomenon of Chinese Internet language is primarily manifested in three aspects: semantic composition, usage scenes and cultural structure. From the perspective of post-subculture theory, the phenomenon is tightly associated with the transformation of media and commerce.*

Keywords: Post-subculture, Internet language, Internet buzzwords.

1. Introduction

In 1997, the 1st Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) showed that the number of Internet users in China was only 620,000 [1]. In 2024, this figure reached a staggering 1,092,000,000 [2]. A huge group of Internet users is involved in the creation and use of Internet language, which has been generalized to become an influential factor in modern language and modern culture. In accordance with the cultural view, Internet language possesses typical subcultural characteristics, and the generalization of Internet language breaks through the traditional boundaries between subculture and mainstream culture.

2. Research on Internet Language and Post-subculture

2.1 Developments of Chinese Internet Language

According to China's research documents, Internet language as a phenomenon of sociological significance rather than a reduced computer science language began at the beginning of the 21st century. Around 2000, China's local Internet instant messaging software was launched, and the web 2.0 era was inaugurated [3]. The relation between Internet users and information began to transform into a more democratic relationship of coexistence, and Internet language gradually evolved into a linguistic, sociological, and communicative discursive formation. Due to the comparative limitations of technology and communication, the connotation of early Internet language included emoticons consisting of numbers, letters, punctuation, abbreviated acronyms, harmonic phrases, etc. [4] Drawing from that, there was a clear distinction between network language and daily life language. Later scholars pointed out that the previously referenced mode should not be regarded as Internet language which is extensively researched, but as a complementary form of it. With the rapid expansion of the scale of Internet users, the increase of public Internet participation, and the diversified production of Internet contents, the derivation mechanism of Internet language has absorbed affect, visuality, and media dissemination. Simultaneously, both the form and content of Internet language have become more complex and diversified.

On the one hand, online language has gradually ceased to be a mere textual symbol, and has even evolved into a linguistic expression integrating gestures, expressions, voice and tone. For instance, the trendy phrase "you've kicked the cotton" is a response to malicious provocation in life, which consists of a hand covering the mouth, a calm expression and a dramatic high-pitched voice. This has been called "Wo Nang Wen Xue" by Chinese netizens, indicating self-mockery and helpless vulnerability. Moreover, "Tai Ku La" is also going viral among young people, expressing strong admiration with a rising tone and exaggerated accents. "Barbe Q Le" is originated from English word "barbecue", the expression of which has an intonation drag.

On the other hand, the degree of social, emotional and interactive nature of online language has increased. "Small-town Swot" and "contemporary Kong Yi Ji" are derived from social events, pointing to a series of social problems such as class solidification, devaluation of academic qualifications, and fierce social competition. "Family Who Knows" originated from short video platform, and rapidly became an network slang for netizens to share information and emphasize empathy. The phrase "Wo Zhen De Shuan Q" is a combination of the Chinese and English words "thank you", which means being sarcastic towards other people's attitudes and behaviors.

2.2 Subcultural Characteristics of Internet Language

Birmingham School emerged in the middle 20th century, and its theories emphasized the resistance of subcultures, and the class struggle. However, they paid too much attention to the confrontation between mainstream culture and subculture, and used the theory of "incorporation" to explain the relationship between the two, thus largely ignoring the possible ambiguity between them. With the transformation of subculture landscape and the differentiation of subculture tribes, as well as the "rapid expansion of western postmodern theoretical discourse in the field of cultural studies [5], " the subcultural theories of the Birmingham School are no longer

strong enough to explain new subculture phenomena and, at the same time, to answer the social problems that it has aroused.

Post-subculture scholars such as Andy Bennett, David Muggleton, and Sarah Thornton conduct new investigations into contemporary subcultures, and provide more postmodern interpretation of subculture's emergence route, internal structures, and development consequence. Firstly, they emphasize the "consumption" and "fun" of subculture. Consequently, subculture's function regarding politics and class are weakened, and it "degenerates" into a kind of "supermarket commodity" that can be freely chosen and consumed according to interests. Following such theoretical path, subculture and subculture groups are no longer stable and solid based on class, race and occupation, but are conversely characterized by transience, changeability and mobility. Secondly, they argue that Birmingham School's theory of "resistance/incorporation" denies the positivity of media and commerce in creating subcultures. In the framework of post-subculture theory, media and commerce no longer eliminate the existence of subculture through "incorporation". Instead, media and commerce actively participate in the production of subculture, and even more, become direct agents of the process. Thirdly, post-subculture scholars suggest that subculture is no longer inextricably associated with geographic space, but have become decentralized and mobile [6]. This is not unrelated to the emergence of cyberspace, where new means of communication have subverted the original mechanism of community generation, and the space in which subcultures can operate has been expanded in an unprecedented way.

Birmingham School defines subculture through the qualities of marginality, resistance and subordination. Early Chinese Internet language possessed such classic subcultural characteristics. In the early stage of its development, the number of people using the Internet was limited, and the Internet did not encounter the life of the general public. On the other hand, Internet language was limited within a small group of people on specific platforms, and with the traditional inertia of the mainstream media, the influence of Internet language on mainstream culture was largely limited. In terms of the relationship between mainstream culture and early Chinese Internet language, the latter is characterized by its marginal and subordinate nature. In addition, the users of early online language have obviously exclusive tendency, thus they distinguish different groups and establish their own virtual identities through the very habits of online language using, from which circles concerning interests, taste and activities derived. In the process of the formation of circles, the network language acquired the characteristic of resistance. Moreover, in the process of being used by specific groups, it gradually gained the function of counteracting the mainstream culture, which had the dominant discourse power. As a part of Internet culture, early Chinese Internet language possesses all the characteristics in accordance with Birmingham School's definition of subculture, which also explicates the reasonability of putting Internet language in the framework of subculture.

However, with the profound changes in Internet language itself, the classical subculture theoretical framework has become somewhat outdated. In the past thirty years, the number of Internet users in China has exploded, and nowadays almost everyone is easily accessible to the online world. As a result, the use of Internet language is no longer limited to specific small circles, but has gradually evolved into a popular language. In addition, network culture has deeply infiltrated and reshaped mainstream culture. Serious media and authorities are increasingly using network language officially, even internalizing it into media language paradigm, giving network language a mainstream status. Following such perspectives, does it mean that Internet language has lost its subcultural attributes and become popular culture?

Unlike the classical subculture theory, the post-subculture theory does not identify subculture explicitly, but emphasizes the ambiguity, interest and weak resistance in the post-subculture landscape. With the transformation of network media, network content production and interaction mechanisms, the relatively fixed and closed network small circles in the early days have become more and more volatile, open and transient, the boundaries between different network language user groups have become more and more blurred. The path from birth to extinction of online language is getting shorter and shorter, and the speed of online language change is getting faster and faster. In this process, a very small part of Internet language appears in the public's view, and even evolves into a part of the mainstream culture, but most of the Internet language is still in a subtype status, and is only used by specific groups in specific scenes. From this point of view, Internet language is far from acquiring the attributes of popularization or mainstreaming, it nonetheless has to be admitted that its relationship with mainstream culture has become ambiguous. Therefore, there is a reasonable basis for applying the theoretical framework of post-subcultural studies to analyze the development of Chinese Internet language.

3. The Generalization of Internet Language

3.1 Representations of Chinese Internet Language Generalization

According to the definition of Modern Chinese Dictionary, generalization means expanding from the specific and the individual to the general. Here, the term generalization is used to describe the process that Internet language "breaks away from the small circle of network culture, becomes known and used by the public, and evolves into popular vocabulary". The generalization of Internet language is mainly manifested in three aspects: semantic composition, usage scenes and cultural structure.

From the perspective of semantics, the connotation of some Internet languages has been transformed in the process of dissemination and use, and their semantics are no longer limited to specific contexts, but have gained a more generalized meaning. "Zhen Xiang" originated from a reality show on Hunan TV in 2014. In the program, the main character disliked the living conditions in the countryside and said that he would never eat the food of rural families, but he eventually ate it and exclaimed "it smells really good". After the program was broadcast, the scene was widely spread and a large number of memes were created. It has also gained a

broader meaning, being used to describe "vowing not to do something, but still doing it and getting a better result", expressing a positive attitude of compromise. Early on, the phrase "Po Fang" was often used in military contexts, originally meaning "to break down a defense". With semantic appropriation, "Po Fang " has gradually become a broader Internet buzzword, which means "to be greatly touched inwardly". Originally, "Lying Flat" had a purely literal meaning, but with the economic development slowdown, the intensification of social competition, and the sudden increase in the pressure on young people's employment, " Lying Flat " has gradually come to express a submissive attitude of "giving up the competition and not resisting". The word "lie flat" gradually expresses a submissive attitude of "withdrawing voluntarily from relentless competition and pressure to achieve ".

In terms of using context, Internet language has gradually left the virtual Internet space and entered the more concrete real life. Some of the early Chinese Internet languages have become commonly accepted and understood by the public in daily communication through the filtering of the media, e.g. "Yi Mer Er", "Wa Sai", "520 ", "666" and so on. These network terms are widely used in daily communication and have got out of the limitations of the Internet platform, and the attributes of the network subculture at their roots have gradually weakened. In addition, contemporary Chinese Internet language shows a tendency of rich expression forms, which inevitably affects the gesture, body movements, tone of voice, and even the thinking logic of daily communication. For example, the 2023 Internet buzzword "you're a good person" has an obvious tone of flirting and teasing. The tone is an important element of this kind of Internet buzzwords, and in the process of communication, the tone and the texts are inextricably intertwined as whole.

From the perspective of cultural structure, network language is more and more frequently used by the mainstream media and even official authorities. And it has become an indispensable part of modern Chinese language. For example, "Center" is frequently used in the culture of the fandom, meaning "the core of the team" or "the middlemost position in a specific space ". In the process of semantic generalization of "Center", its meaning is derived as "the most important part", and the specific meaning is gradually adopted by mainstream media. For instance,

(a) In this Spring Festival, *Wandering Earth* occupied the center and was hailed by the audience as a milestone production of domestic science fiction films. (Guang Ming Daily)

(b) Putting manpower in the shiny center. (People's Daily)

(c) Unlike in the past, the center of the "think tank meeting" is the new army recruits. (China Military Net)

3.2 Causes for the Generalization of Internet Language

First of all, the weakening of subculture's resistance and the enhancement of its entertainment make subculture no longer be confined to a specific circle, but more easily accepted by the public. Scholars of post-subcultural studies realize that

"subcultures are expressions and extensions of the dominant system of symbolization, not alienations or oppositions of that system [5]". Internet language shows a decline in resistance and an increase in harmlessness, which makes it easier for the public to tolerate and accept it. Around 2002, textspeak became popular among Chinese teenagers especially in the Internet community. This online language disassembles, reorganizes, and imitates the original Chinese characters, supplemented with a large number of symbols, consequently to form a secret and exclusive writing system with popular among the youth. In the Internet space, teenagers try to use this highly exclusive "secret script" to express their identities and fight against patriarchal culture. In recent years, Internet languages such as "Guo language" and "Lan language" have obviously lost their resistance color. These Internet languages have abandoned the strategy of imitating the writing system, and instead emphasized the entertainment of speech patterns, which makes it easier for them to break through the inherent audience groups, and make a breakthrough in their path of dissemination. This makes it easier for their communication path to break through the inherent audience groups and carry out "circle-breaking" communication.

Secondly, the media and commerce have played a strong role in promoting the generalization of online language. Post-subcultural studies have argued that the Birmingham School's theory of "incorporation" is outdated. The Birmingham School places subculture as the absolute opposite of media and commerce, and they believe that the incorporation of commerce and media will lead to the destructive demise of subcultures as they are completely absorbed into the mainstream. In the post-subculture era, media and commerce do not stand in opposition to subculture, nor do they pose a fundamental threat to its existence. On the contrary, subcultures have absorbed "a great deal of media resources" from the very beginning of their existence, and media and commerce have even directly led to the creation of subcultures6.

On the one hand, the rise of new media has given rise to a large number of online languages, and short video platforms have since become the main force in incubating online buzzwords. With the growing influence of online language, traditional media began to intervene, filtering and sifting online language and eventually precipitating it into a modern language paradigm. Traditional media gained enough discourse power in the early stage of media development, so their intervention made online language gain the power to enter the mainstream. On the other hand, the profit-seeking nature of capital drives business to utilize online language for profit, absorbing online language into the system of production, packaging and marketing of commodities. In the wide variety of consumption scenarios built by commerce, online language becomes an object that can be consumed and consumed. The open property of the market exposes these online languages from different subcultural circles to the public, further contributing to the generalization of online languages.

4. Conclusion and Reflection

In the Internet era, it has become relatively prevalent for online language to evolve from a small circle communication

method to a popular language used by public, and internet language has assumed increasingly important expressive functions. Nevertheless, many scholars are concerned that the rapid development of Internet language has led to language disorder and undermined the purity of the Chinese language, and that the pornographic, violent, superficial, vulgar, and morally corrupted parts of Internet language have exerted a negative impact on society and culture [7]. Inevitably, there are elements in subcultures that are at odds with mainstream values, and they attack the value system promoted by the dominant culture. However, this kind of influence does not contain the ability to subvert the mainstream culture. Conversely, it is a kind of deviation which is tolerated by the mainstream culture. In the process of generalization of Internet language, not all Internet languages can be evolved into buzzwords. On the contrary, it is only after Internet language is selected and filtered that it can enter the mainstream and become a language used by the public. In addition, network regulators and mainstream media play the function of monitoring and controlling online language, which to a certain extent reduces the negative function of online language. Overall, the phenomenon of generalization of online language is an inevitable result of the development of modern language system, and its negative impact remains limited.

Fund

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